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Viewing cable 08CAIRO2503, QUINT POLICY PLANNING TALKS FOCUS ON REGIONAL

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SUBJECT: QUINT POLICY PLANNING TALKS FOCUS ON REGIONAL ISSUES

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey

Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The November 18 "Quint" consultations with policy planners from Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt (host) and the U.S. yielded a comprehensive dialogue on a range of regional issues, including Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, piracy off the Horn of Africa, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Iraqi delegation indicated its desire to align itself with moderates in the region and expressed broad agreement with the other participants on key issues, including the importance of reaching a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and continuing support for President Abbas. Iraq's presentation on internal progress and pleas for political and economic assistance were generally well-received, though the Saudis said nothing during this part of the discussion. The Egyptians argued strongly that the Annapolis Process be maintained for the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict and were especially forthcoming in highlighting concerns regarding Iran; the other delegations largely concurred. All participants expressed enthusiasm for continuing to meet in this format, and the Jordanians offered to host the next session sometime this spring. End summary.

12. (U) Delegations

Egypt: MFA Chief of Cabinet Wafa Bassim; Assistant Minister for Arab Affairs Abdel Rahman Salah; MFA director for Policy Planning Mohammad Zorqani; Senior Advisor and Spokesman Hossam Zaki; Deputy Assistant Minister for Arab Affairs Abdelhameed Marzouk; MFA Cabinet Staff

Iraq: MFA Director of Policy Planning Mohammad Hakim; Advisor to Vice President Mahdi Fareed Yassin; Charge d'Affaires Saad Ali

Jordan: MFA Director of Policy Planning Omar Nahar; Embassy staff

Saudi Arabia: MFA Director of Policy Planning Prince Ahmed bin Saud bin Khaled; Embassy Staff

United States: Director of Policy Planning Dr. David Gordon; Ambassador Margaret Scobey; Principal Deputy for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman; Director for Egypt and Levant Affairs Nicole Shampaine; Policy Planning Staff Member Ash Jain; Embassy First Secretary Greg LoGerfo (notetaker; Embassy Second Secretary Todd Watkins (notetaker)

13. (C) Overall Regional Perspectives

Director of Policy Planning Dr. David Gordon described key trends and challenges as outlined by the National Intelligence Council's "Global Trends 2025" report (which has since been made public). He described a world trending toward multi-polarity, with rising economic powers gaining relative influence, but where the U.S. will likely retain primacy, especially in terms of military power. Dr. Gordon outlined the growing competition for resources, where securing access to reliable sources of energy, water, and food will gain increasing prominence. In addition, while the appeal of terror will likely decline in the coming years, for active terror groups the challenge of weapons and technology proliferation will become even more acute.

14. (C) Middle East challenges: Dr. Gordon described three key challenges likely to face the Middle East in the years ahead: (i) economic integration, and whether the Middle East will use its status as a financial "pole of power" to promote higher economic growth, diversification, and integration into the global economy; (ii) Iran's quest for a nuclear weapons capability, which would have immense regional political consequences and impact regional power projection, and (iii) continued stability in Iraq. A successful Iraq could have dramatic consequences as a hedge against extremism and a force for moderation, tolerance and democratic governance. If the Arab world and others (e.g. Turkey) continue to integrate Iraq we could drastically enhance prospects for success. However, if Iraq fails, the negative impact will be as dramatic, with major spillover effects on regional states.

15. (C) USG transition: Asked to comment on the U.S. presidential transition, Dr. Gordon said that there will likely be changes in our approach to the region, but key U.S. interests will likely remain unchanged. The U.S. will remain committed to the President's two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; our goal is to pass to the next administration the Annapolis Process intact and with positive momentum. The November 8-9 meetings in Sharm el-Sheikh (which included the Israelis, Palestinians and Quartet) were geared toward that end. Dr. Gordon noted that the Arab Peace Initiative (API) will likely remain an important element in the process. On Iran, the new administration may approach

Tehran in a different manner, but opposition to Iran's intent to develop a nuclear weapons capacity will likely remain firm. On Iraq, Dr. Gordon assessed that the next administration will maintain the focus on building a stable Iraq, in the context of a mutually-agreeable withdrawal of USG forces based on the reality on the ground.

¶16. (C) Egypt,s regional assessment: Assistant Foreign Minister for Arab Affairs Abdul-Rahman Salah characterized the regional situation as one of "imminent threats." He stated that the world may be gravitating toward "multi-polarity," but the U.S. will continue to play a special role in the region on the major issues. Salah said that all participants in the discussion ("not just Israel") have a special relationship with the U.S., and seek greater policy consultation with the U.S. (adding that Egypt's recommendations in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were ignored). Salah assessed that moderates in the region have been on the defensive over the past several years, due to the Israeli-Palestinian and Iraq issues. Settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains critical. He said that the GOE agrees on the need for economic development and democratic reforms, but regional crises abound. He argued that the U.S. will need to step up its pace of regional involvement. In addition, he said that Egypt hopes the new administration will be more active in "educating Congress and the American public" on Egypt's role as a moderate regional actor.

¶17. (C) Jordan: MFA Director of Policy Planning Omar Nahar urged the new administration to "listen to its friends" in the region, and work with its allies to deliver something "tangible" to the people of the Arab world. He stressed that the USG maintain "continuity" on key regional issues, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "We cannot afford to wait one year, or even six months. Everyone knows the issues. We need quick engagement." Nahar agreed that the world is trending towards multi-polarity but noted the rise of non-state actors, especially in the Middle East. The U.S. has a special role to confront this trend, Nahar argued.

¶18. (C) Saudi Arabia,s regional outlook: MFA Director for Policy Planning Prince Ahmed bin Saud bin Khaled agreed on the need for the USG to support moderates against extremists, noting the rise of Hizballah in Lebanon as a primary example, as well as Hamas. Saudi Arabia will continue to take the initiative on intra-Arab and intra-Muslim conflicts when possible, such as the Mecca Agreement (Palestinians), and similar efforts with Somalia and Afghanistan. He agreed that the USG should remain actively engaged on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Dr. Gordon commented that Saudi Arabia's intra-faith dialogues have been an important part of efforts to counter extremism.

¶19. (C) Iraq,s perspective: MFA Director of Policy Planning Mohammad Al Hakim stressed the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He argued that economic issues will become paramount in the region; the Arab world has fallen behind on job creation, education and development. Leaders need to focus on what is best for their people, or terrorists will remain empowered. Political issues on a local, personal level, need to be resolved. Iraq seeks to move toward moderation, Hakim said. Iraqi delegation member Farid Yassin commented that economic solutions need be to be internal decisions; he noted the severe problem of underemployment in the Arab world.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

¶10. (C) Egypt,s assessment: MFA Senior Cabinet Advisor and Spokesman Hossam Zaki emphatically urged the incoming administration to maintain the Annapolis Process. "It is important to bear in mind that peace is more important than process. In the 1990s the focus was on process. Meetings became an end in themselves. It was a strenuous effort with no real results. The failure of Camp David in 2000 was a prime example," Zaki said.

¶11. (C) In addition to maintaining Annapolis, the new administration should move to alleviate the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the West Bank, and confront Israeli settlement activity, which if unchecked would threaten the implementation of a two-state solution. The system of roadblocks and checkpoints also remains a serious problem, said Zaki.

¶12. (C) Responding to Zaki's comment that more attention needs to be paid to the UNSCRs on the Arab-Israeli Conflict, PDAS Feltman responded that the "land for peace" formula, articulated at the Madrid talks in 1991, has guided our approach. The situation is challenging but not impossible. Feltman noted we have supported Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and efforts of both sides to confront terror, and we have supported efforts for improved conditions on the ground, with mixed results. He also reminded the group the USG has also worked with Arab states to improve the regional atmosphere, noting that the two-state solution is now the regional political consensus.

¶13. (C) Zaki argued that if the humanitarian situation for the Palestinians were "bearable," it would allow for a Palestinian constituency that supports negotiations with Israel. If, on the other hand, it becomes "unbearable," and on a downward trajectory, support for peace talks will dwindle, and Hamas, and eventually Al Qaeda, will ascend. In this context, Zaki said that the issue of Palestinian prisoners (which he estimated to be 11,000) has affected tens of thousands of their family members for the last 20 years. This mitigates strongly against Palestinian public support for negotiations, he said.

¶14. (C) Zaki said that if Israeli FM Livni is elected, he expects Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will continue. But he expressed deep concern about election of a different Israeli prime minister, and suggested that meeting participants consider how to deal with this "contingency." Dr. Gordon noted that the Arab Peace Initiative (API) has been cited twice by Israeli President Peres, and said that he expects the API will remain an important element in any future discussions. Zaki agreed that the API is "gaining momentum" but said the USG must understand that the API is "not to be altered," and is a clearly delineated bargain of Arab recognition of Israel in return for Palestinian statehood.

¶15. (C) Jordanian view: Delegation head Nahar agreed that the focus should be on facilitating peace rather than on establishment of a new, complex process. Arab states should support Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and insist that any agreement be consistent with UNSCRs 247 and 338. Nahar, Zaki, Saudi Prince Khaled and Iraqi delegation leader Hakim all stressed the need to support PA President Abbas, both in the context of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the ongoing intra-Palestinian political impasse.

¶16. (C) Iraqi view: The Iraqi delegation reiterated the importance of continuing peace talks and extending support for President Abbas. Hakim added that Iraq knows first-hand the damage inflicted by suicide bombers, and suggested that Arabs need to be more sensitive to Israeli concerns on this issue. At the same time, there is not enough attention paid to quality of life issues for the Palestinians and consequences stemming from "denial of their rights under Israeli occupation."

INTRA-PALESTINIAN RECONCILIATION

¶17. (C) Zaki said that the Egyptians remain committed to Palestinian unity, but that the situation is "very complicated." It has been three months of difficult work. If the Palestinians remain divided, Zaki assessed, it will not be conducive to Israeli-Palestinian peace. He said that the Egyptian approach is designed for conciliation; "we don't want mere quiet between belligerents. So it is designed to

support, or at least not obstruct, (Israeli-Palestinian) peace efforts."

ASSESSMENT OF IRAQ

¶18. (C) Iraqi outlook: Hakim said that the GOI was developing security forces, as well as judges and police. The GOI has taken action to assert itself successfully in areas such as Mosul, Diyalah, and Basrah. Internal provincial elections will be held at the end of January; these will be critical in identifying the strength of various political parties. Kirkuk, due to its multi-ethnicity, remains an issue, Hakim said. U.N. envoy di Mastura has presented a proposal, of which the Iraqi Parliament approved a modified version.

¶19. (C) Economic reconstruction: The GOI has drastically reduced the percentage of GDP spent on the military, from a high of approximately 65 percent in 2003. Iraq is focusing on rebuilding its infrastructure, but needs help from Arab states, especially on oil production and electricity infrastructure. Iraq still imports oil products as well as food, but Hakim said the GOI expects to be self-sufficient in these areas, and economically independent, in a few years.

¶20. (C) Hakim said that the growing size of the Iraqi government and bureaucracy is problematic. The private sector remains weak; as a result Iraqis seek employment in the public sector. With 22 universities graduating thousands of students a year, demand exceeds the supply of good jobs. The GOI is focusing on developing provinces and decentralizing some decision-making; "Baghdad is not always right," Hakim acknowledged.

¶21. (C) Hakim said that Iraq is multiethnic and diverse, but has an abundance of human and natural resources; the GOI is trying to take the country in a new direction. "We are now walking, but not yet able to run," he said. The friendship of the United States is critical for Iraq and other regional states; Hakim said that Iran's role in the region is also "very important." Iraq has borders with six neighbors and has "positive and negative" aspects of its relations with all of them.

¶22. (C) Farid Yassin commented that the GOI, Coalition Provincial Authority, U.S. and U.N. had all made mistakes over the past five years. He contended that the United Nation's electoral framework for Iraq was flawed, and had resulted in Iraqis voting based on ethnic identities, as opposed to issues. The GOI is working to repair this problem, Yassin said. Egyptian delegation leader Bassim agreed that Iraqi electoral politics seemed to be moving away from sectarianism, and said that Egypt "will do what Iraq asks" to help on this issue.

¶23. (C) Plea for Arab engagement: Explaining that Iraqi special forces had made real progress in countering terrorist groups, Yassin implored Iraq's Arab neighbors to do more to help Iraq. "Please engage with Iraq, we really need you," he said. Yassin specified that Saudi assistance on agriculture would be welcomed, although the Saudis did not respond. Given the importance of greater Sunni political representation, Yassin also suggested the need for Arab states to encourage active Sunni participation in the upcoming provincial elections.

¶24. (C) Hakim said that he was optimistic that the U.S.-Iraqi Status of Forces (SOFA) agreement would be approved by the Iraqi Parliament on the basis of a "yes or no" vote. Dr. Gordon said that the SOFA was a critical document that represented the healthy assertion of Iraqi sovereignty and a repudiation of negative Iranian influence in Iraq, given that Tehran had made defeat of the SOFA a major strategic goal. It is very important that Arab states support Iraq's ratification and implementation of the agreement, said Gordon. Suggesting that he agreed, Hakim thanked the U.S. for its explanation of why the SOFA was so important to both parties.

¶25. (C) The Egyptian and Jordanian delegations expressed support for the GOI. The Egyptians pointed to increasing GOI-GOE cooperation, ongoing consultations on debt relief, and the plan to return an ambassador to Baghdad. Bassim said she would lead the Egyptian delegation to the upcoming GOE-GOI strategic discussions. She said Iraq can constitute "a promise or a threat" to Egypt and the region, and the GOE remains concerned about the potential for division. It is very important that regional partners and the U.S. stay focused and coordinated, noted Bassim. Jordan's Nahar welcomed "such candid talk" from the Iraqi delegation. All delegations agreed that cross-border movement of extremists into Iraq is a problem, but equally concerning is the potential for an increase of outbound extremists as the Iraqi security situation improves.

¶26. (C) Note: The Saudi delegation declined to comment during the Iraq portion of the discussions, ignoring two direct opportunities to do so. End note.

LEBANON

¶27. (C) Egyptian MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Arab Affairs Ayman Zeineldeen assessed the situation as markedly improved since the May crisis. However, given Lebanon's connection to other regional dynamics, the chance of a flare-up remains. The Egyptians do not believe there will be a clear winner in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Christians will likely comprise the swing vote. Hizballah will retain its supply lines but appears to be politically constrained from using force internally. Zeineldeen also opined that Syrian behavior had improved, but that a fundamental change in Syria's approach to Lebanon will take more time.

¶28. (C) PDAS Feltman said that the USG goal is full implementation of UNSC 1701. Since the Doha agreement we have seen reinvigoration of state institutions. This is a positive development, as moderates can better compete through the institution of the state, where they are strong. By contrast, Hizballah proved in May that it can control the street through force. The USG will increase total assistance to 1.3 billion dollars. We believe a normal Lebanon-Syria diplomatic relationship is possible, but we remain concerned about Syria's intentions. The Qusayeh military base in the Beqaa Valley is an arms smuggling transit point and is linked to Damascus, for example. The USG agrees that the Christians will likely be the swing voters in the parliamentary elections. Feltman and Zeineldeen agreed that Hizballah will likely remain quiet in the run-up to the elections, but it is unclear how they would react to a significant electoral defeat or if they would foresee a probable electoral defeat.

¶29. (C) Egyptian MFA Senior Advisor Zaki said that supporting the Lebanese military is critical. "We need to know that the army can function," he emphasized. Zaki claimed the Egyptians are "constantly" urging the Israelis not to interfere in the internal Lebanese political situation. He strongly urged that the Taif Accord of 1989 remain in place to ensure 50-50 Christian-Muslim representation. Zaki said he has heard that ideas for modification of Taif have been floated, based on different proportions for the three groups (but that would increase Shia power), but that Egypt does not favor this change.

¶30. (C) Feltman responded that the USG view is that the Lebanese themselves can choose to modify Taif, but that we are not pushing this option. The USG is fully committed to supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces, and we appreciate Egypt's help on this. Perhaps resolution of Shebaa Farms would politically weaken Hizballah, but how would the Lebanese state move to consolidate its power following such an agreement? The Lebanese should explain how they would capitalize on this, and first seek assurances from Syria that it would demarcate its border with Lebanon. Zeineldeen commented that Syria has stated publicly that Shebaa is

Lebanese territory and this should be used as a basis to push for border demarcation. Even if Shebaa was resolved, Feltman predicted that Hizballah would no doubt find an alternative grievance related to Israel as a pretext to maintaining its arms; in fact Hizballah recently raised the issue of seven Lebanese villages currently located in Israel that apparently had been Lebanese prior to 1923.

IRAN

¶31. (C) Bassim began by noting that Iran was the key to future stability or instability in the region. Iran's "capability to penetrate into the neighborhood" posed real concerns. Egyptian MFA Director of Policy Planning Zorqani gave an overview of Iran and regional implications. He argued that Iran has the full right for peaceful use of a civilian nuclear program, but that Iran's lack of transparency has led to a general lack of trust in the region. He raised Israel's nuclear program and the well-worn "double-standard" argument. Zorqani said that all diplomatic levers, including sanctions, should be used with Tehran, but warned that a military strike on Iran would have "grave consequences" for an already volatile region. Pointing to Iran's "destabilizing and subversive" activities, he suggested the need for a coordinated approach to deal with Iran. He reiterated Egypt's interest in pursuing a joint P5 1/GCC 3 meeting and also called for regional security arrangements that include all parties.

¶32. (C) Egyptian MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Iran Affairs Yousef Sharkawy said economic sanctions have put Tehran into a constant "crisis mode." That said, he did not foresee any threat to the position of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, but rather to the contrary. He said President Ahmadinejad had aggregated power to some extent, but Sharkawy argued that no important decision can be made without Khamenei's consent. Ahmadinejad appears to have the support of Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guard, and conservatives, and as such is in a good position to remain president. Other contenders include former President Mohammed Khatemi. Dr. Gordon noted that the upcoming elections in Iran could consolidate power at the top.

¶33. (C) Dr. Gordon agreed that Iran has legitimate aspirations, but obtaining a nuclear weapon capability and regional domination were not among them. The incoming administration will not likely deviate from this, but may engage with Tehran in a different manner. Tehran continues to support Hizballah and Hamas, and is intent on derailing Israeli-Syria talks (facilitated by Turkey). The Iranians provide lethal support to resistance groups in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Tehran has had difficulties in Iraq and with declining oil revenues, is facing serious economic challenges. We believe that now is the time for the U.N. coalition to increase the pressure, said Gordon.

¶34. (C) The Iraqi delegation stated that Iraq too has concerns with Iran, particularly its support for militias and "cross-border interventions." But Hakim said that the reality is that Iran is a neighbor that the GCC states and Iraq have lived with "for centuries." A nuclear-armed Iran would be a regional threat, and Iraq does not want to see this happen. Hakim argued that Iran will be deliberate and patient, and seek to outlast the political will of the U.N. sanctions regime. He suggested that bullying Iran is not a solution; we should pursue dialogue instead. He disagreed that Ahmadinejad was secure as president, and suggested that Ali Larijani and former president Akbar Rafsanjani -- both pragmatists in his view -- are legitimate contenders for the presidency.

¶35. (C) The Saudi Arabian delegation agreed that a nuclear free zone in the Middle East was an important goal, and concurred with the Egyptian objection of a "double standard" for Israel. However, Prince Khaled was emphatic that Saudi Arabia "does not want a problem on its eastern border." He agreed that the international community should seek out all

diplomatic options to address Tehran's nuclear ambitions, but the burden is on Iran to signal it is serious about changing its posture. "Time is ticking. We do not see a new Iranian president or political players anytime soon." Rafsanjani is a "good man" but is not a decision maker. "We cannot play games. This is very serious for us in the gulf and we are considering contingency plans in case the oil market is disrupted (by Iran)." The Jordanian delegation observed that the U.S. and European "good-cop/bad-cop" approach is appropriate, and that both roles are necessary.

PIRACY

¶36. (C) Egyptian Deputy Assistant Minister for South and East Africa Abdelhameed Marzouk said that the GOE was concerned about two inter-related issues, piracy near the Red Sea and the situation on the ground in Somalia. Egypt was backing all efforts for a comprehensive peace agreement between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the opposition, without exclusion, to achieve security and peace on land. Egypt supports coordinated efforts to combat and face piracy on the seas. Bassim said "a state of chaos" in Somalia led to the "return of the phenomena of piracy." That said, piracy is currently limited to the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, and the Somali coast, and had not yet entered the Red Sea. Bassim noted the Red Sea riparian states, together with the TFG and the Arab League, would meet on November 20 to study the piracy issue; its roots, beneficiaries, and the political, economic, and security impact (septel).

¶37. (C) Dr. Gordon agreed on the link between conditions in Somalia and the rise in piracy. He said that the TFG's "limited ability" was "diminishing" and encouraged other states to work with UN Special Envoy Ould-Abdallah to encourage elements in Somalia, including the Islamists, to join the political process, though Shebaab's "extensive ties to Al Qaeda" may warrant its exclusion. On the piracy angle, Dr. Gordon said that the U.S. is interested in exploring enhanced naval cooperation to resolve the problem. The stakes for Egypt are particularly high because piracy could affect the "credibility of the Suez Canal as a transport route." Dr. Gordon asked if Egypt would be willing to take custody of the pirates for trial. He said that it is not clear whether the U.S. would have a legal basis on which to try the pirates, unless they attacked U.S. persons, or a U.S. vessel.

¶38. (SBU) Saudi Prince Khaled said that the KSA, after the Arab League ministerial, had offered to host a meeting of Somali parties in Jeddah. He agreed that the Shebaab have the same philosophy as Al Qaeda and should not be invited to Jeddah. Saudi Arabia would take the U.S. offer to deepen cooperation under consideration.

NEXT MEETING IN JORDAN

¶39. (SBU) All participants expressed enthusiasm for the Quint dialogue, praising Bassim and her Egyptian colleagues for organizing a successful meeting and indicated their desire to continue to meet in this format in the future. Dr. Gordon commented that the meeting "exceeded expectations." Suggesting that it provided a useful mechanism for consultation and an opportunity to discuss sensitive topics in an informal setting, Jordanian delegation leader Nahar offered to host the next meeting sometime this spring.

SCOBey